



Choosing a Wayside Panel Material

When choosing a panel-imaging process, remember that there is no perfect product. In fact, there is not even a single “best” product available. The task, instead, is to select the product that is most appropriate to your needs and circumstances. Given the number of factors to consider, and the increasing number of products from which to choose, the decision is not simple. We hope the following information will help. Keep in mind that each imaging process has its strengths, and each has its limitations. The goal is to find one that best suits your needs.

Environment

Of all the environmental forces that affect the durability of an outdoor exhibit panel, sunshine is usually the most damaging. The extent of sun-related damage (primarily due to ultraviolet rays) will depend on the exhibit’s altitude (ultraviolet effects are greater at higher elevations), its orientation (i.e., which way it faces), its configuration (whether the panel is mounted vertically or at an angle), and simply the amount of annual sunshine the panel receives. The greatest impact of sunshine is fading. However, high heat, and fluctuating temperatures, can also cause some materials to warp or delaminate. Other environmental conditions, including wind-blown sand, tree residue, dirt, bird droppings, and moisture, can also impact the life of an outdoor exhibit.

Graphic Quality

The ability of a panel-imaging process to properly reproduce graphic images is very important. There is no quantitative measure to help determine which process to select. Simple comparisons of DPI (dots per inch) and LPI (lines per inch) are confusing, and don’t always apply to each imaging process. The best way to judge visual quality is simply to view a panel (in natural light) and determine for yourself whether it is a clear and accurate likeness of the images from which it was produced. Do not rely on samples provided by fabrication vendors; instead, ask that samples be made from materials that you supply.

Cost

Cost is a factor that should be considered very carefully. As with any purchase, the true cost of a wayside exhibit panel can only be determined by weighing initial cost against durability. A panel that is inexpensive to purchase but does not last is not a bargain.

Lifespan

On the other hand, a panel that costs more but lasts far longer than the information it presents is not a bargain either. If you expect that a panel’s content will change soon or often, choose a material that will allow changes to be made quickly and less expensively.

Maintenance

Keep in mind that a panel’s lifespan is not simply a function of its inherent durability, but also depends on your ability to care for it. Simply put, a panel will last longer if it is well maintained. If you lack the resources or the commitment to properly maintain your exhibits, durability will be an especially important consideration.

Vandalism

Of course, no matter how hard you try to care for your wayside exhibits, there will always be people who vandalize them. The behavior of your visitors is one of the most critical factors to consider when selecting a panel material. While no material will survive a determined vandal, some resist better than others. Having the most rugged material is, however, not the only defense against vandals. Often the best response—to either intentional harm or unintentional wear from normal use by large numbers of visitors—is to select panels that can be replaced quickly and inexpensively.